

Road opportunities should give Wildcats possibility to finish season strong



TATE STEINLAGE
THE COLLEGIAN

Basketball, among other things, oftentimes coins the phrase, "It's not where you start, it's where you finish."

For the K-State men's basketball team, that could not be more true than this year. If it weren't, then the season would have been over long ago.

But this team is a far cry from the one that lost its season-opener to Northern Colorado 60-58 in front of its home crowd on Nov. 8. This squad has upset the likes of Kansas, Gonzaga and Oklahoma State. The season has seen rushed courts, surprising blowouts, and the despair from buzzer beaters.

K-State has certainly seen it all this year. But the season isn't over, and how far the Wildcats will go is a narrative that's yet to be told.

Yes, there's a time and place to discuss next year. But the Wildcats need to focus now on finishing strong so that there's momentum heading into recruiting and preseason workouts. K-State already has two commitments for 2014-15 and are eyeing at least four others, two of which are ESPN three-star recruits.

Then you have the prospect of returning the likes of freshmen guards Marcus Foster, Wesley Iwundu, Jevon Thomas and Nigel Johnson. Also included in prospective returns are junior forwards Thomas Gipson and Nino Williams and sophomore forward D.J. Johnson.

However, now is not the time or place to dig into these discussions. Rather, let's talk about this year's squad. K-State has six conference games



EMILY DESHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN

The K-State bench celebrates during their 85-83 win over then-No. 7 Kansas Jayhawks at Bramlage Coliseum on Feb. 10.

remaining, three of which are on the road in tough-to-play venues. Though a regular-season Big 12 title is likely out of reach, coming away with these road wins should give the Wildcats confidence heading into postseason play.

This cannot be emphasized enough. K-State has

fared poorly on the road this year, unable to produce the same energy Bramlage Coliseum brings at home. Depending on who the Wildcats play in Kansas City, Mo. at the Big 12 Tournament, the Sprint Center won't be a neutral-site atmosphere in the way Intrust Bank Arena in Wichita, Kan.

was against Gonzaga earlier this season.

The same goes for March Madness. As of Monday, ESPN's Joe Lunardi has K-State slotted for a seventh seed in the South Region. That would put the Wildcats in Raleigh, N.C. for the round of 64. While the K-State faithful

always tend to travel well, it will still look much more like a road game for head coach Bruce Weber's squad than anything else.

So while this season has been somewhat of a roller coaster of emotions, this K-State team has much to play for in the weeks to come.

Finishing the season strong can cap off a fantastic year for the Wildcats, and help jumpstart next year's anticipated campaign.

Tate Steinlage is a sophomore in pre-journalism. Please send comments to sports@kstatecollegian.com.



TIPOFF

7 p.m. Bramlage Coliseum



EMILY DESHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN

Freshman guard **Marcus Foster** leaps past Kansas junior guard **Naadir Tharpe** on Feb. 10 at Bramlage Coliseum. Foster is averaging 15.1 points per game.

K-State to take on struggling TCU

By JOHN ZETMEIR
THE COLLEGIAN

It is tough to beat the K-State Wildcats at home this season. In fact, only one team has come into Bramlage Coliseum and walked away with a win this season. That was Northern Colorado in the Wildcats' first game of the season. On Wednesday night in Bramlage Coliseum, the Wildcats (17-8, 7-5 Big 12) will play host to the struggling TCU Horned Frogs (9-15, 0-12 Big 12).

The Wildcats are one of two Big 12 teams that have not lost on their home court in conference play. A big reason for that has been the Wildcats' stifling defense. In the six conference games that the Wildcats have played at Bramlage Coliseum this season, K-State is holding their opponents to an average of 35.8 percent shooting from the field.

On the offensive end, freshman guard Marcus Foster has found a way to elevate his game in front of the purple clad fans. The freshman averages 15.1 points per game this season. At home during Big

12 play, Foster is averaging nearly 18 points per contest. In the last two home games, Foster has scored 34 points and is 9-13 from behind the arc.

K-State enters Wednesday's matchup coming off of a double overtime loss to the hands of Baylor. The Wildcats appeared to finally have gotten over the hump on the road, but after Baylor tied it up with a buzzer beater at the end of regulation, the Wildcats just couldn't catch a break.

"The mood is good," junior forward Nino Williams said. "We just know that it was a tough loss. We could have made plays down the stretch to win."

It has been a different story for the Wildcats on the road as opposed to at home this season. K-State was without senior forward Shane Southwell for the Baylor game, making the Wildcats an even smaller team physically. Height is not something the Wildcats can afford to sacrifice.

The Horned Frogs enter Wednesday's matchup having not won a Big 12 road game since they've entered the conference. Last year was TCU's

first season as members of Big 12, they have only won two conference games since.

"We just have to come out and play hard," junior forward Thomas Gipson said. "Get (TCU) out early and execute and just be good on defense."

TCU has struggled this season, but that does not mean that they are without talent. Leading the way for the Horned Frogs is junior guard Kyan Anderson who leads TCU, averaging nearly 17 points per game. Last season in Bramlage Coliseum, Anderson finished with 29 points. In the first meetings this season, the junior struggled, finishing with 12 points.

With the lack of size that the Wildcats present, TCU could lean heavily on the play of junior forward Amric Fields. The 6-foot-9-inch 220 pound junior is second on the team in both points and rebound this season. Earlier this season, Fields led the Horned Frogs with 14 points against the Wildcats.

The Wildcats sit just above the middle of the Big 12 pack while TCU sit at the very bottom. Tipoff is scheduled for 7 p.m. in Bramlage Coliseum.

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By the numbers



TAYLOR ALDERMAN | THE COLLEGIAN

Freshman guard **Marcus Foster** shoots a 3-pointer as Longhorn sophomore center **Cameron Ridley** runs to defend him on Feb. 8 in Bramlage Coliseum. Foster had 34 points against the Longhorns.

By **AUSTIN EARL**
THE COLLEGIAN

12

Straight losses that TCU has endured

TCU is currently on a 12-game losing streak. Their last win came against Texas Southern, before conference play started. That win was on Dec. 29, so TCU has yet to win a game in 2014. The Horned Frogs will come to Manhattan looking for their first win against a team that hasn't lost a home game since Nov. 8.

28.4

K-State's defensive three-point shooting percentage

Teams only shoot 28.4 percent from beyond the arc when they play the Wildcats. That mark is good enough to rank

K-State eighth in the country. TCU shoots just 33.2 percent from 3-point range. The combination of perimeter defense and lack of shots in this game means that the Horned Frogs will have to rely on their mid-range game and shots in the lane.

43

Blocks by TCU freshman Karviar Shepherd this season

Shepherd has made a habit of turning away would-be scorers when they come to the basket. His defense comes with a price though, as he is frequently in foul trouble. Shepherd will be looking to send shots the other way while staying off the bench on Wednesday night in Bramlage Coliseum.

64.9

Points per game for TCU

TCU averages 64.9 points per game, which ranks 311th

in the country. K-State allows 63.6 points per game, which ranks 32nd in the country. This is an obvious mismatch. The Wildcats held the Horned Frogs to just 47 points – a season low – in the first meeting between these two teams. K-State can run away with this game quickly if they play that same sort of defense.

81

Points TCU junior guard Kyan Anderson has scored in his past three games

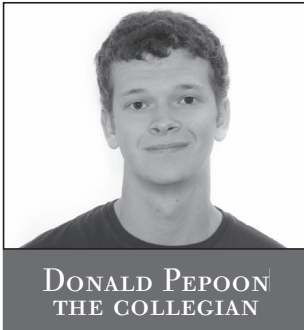
Anderson has been on fire as of late, averaging 27 points in each of his past three contests. He has done this very efficiently, shooting 61 percent from the field. He also has hit outside shots well in this stretch, making nine of his 16 attempts. Anderson is TCU's leading scorer for the season and will be a handful for the Wildcats.

Time for doubting Weber is over; he's earned respect



EMILY DESHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN

Head coach **Bruce Weber** yells as his team holds him back during his first K-State career win over Kansas on Feb. 10 in Bramlage Coliseum.



DONALD PEPOON
THE COLLEGIAN

For a head coach who led his team to a conference championship in his first year, Bruce Weber entered the 2013-14 season with an abnormal amount of criticism from his fan base. Many were skeptical if Weber would be able to find success without relying on the players that other coaches recruited, like Rodney McCruider and Martavious Irving, that had been critical in obtaining a share of the 2013 Big 12 title. At his previous job with the University of Illinois, Weber's 2005 squad made it to the national title game of the NCAA tournament, but relied heavily on players recruited by Weber's predecessor, Kansas head coach Bill Self.

Criticism is nothing new in the Weber era of K-State basketball; critics were most vocal at the time of Weber's hiring in the spring of 2012. Many seemed bewildered by the fact that their next basketball coach was fired by his previous employer. If Weber couldn't sustain success at Illinois, he couldn't be successful here, could he?

As Weber nears the end of his second season at the helm of the K-State basketball program, the questions surrounding his hiring can be now answered with confidence. Every shred of doubt that still lingered with Weber as he entered this season has been debunked.

Yes, he can recruit. Yes, he can be successful here. Yes, he was the right hire.

Yes, he can recruit

Critics questioned his ability to recruit, since neither of his first two recruiting classes seemed to carry much star power.

This season has shown why recruiting ability shouldn't be measured by a number of stars attributed to players by a website, but by their production on the court. Marcus Foster is the best freshman to wear a K-State uniform since

Michael Beasley, and every other member of this year's class has seen major minutes on the court throughout the season.

The 2013-14 Wildcats weren't supposed to be the kind of dangerous team that they have become. Picked to finish tied for fifth in the preseason conference rankings, most analysts viewed this season as a rebuilding year for K-State. After seeing three key seniors graduate from last season's team, and the departures of star point guard Angel Rodriguez and center Adrian Diaz, few experts gave K-State much of a chance of making the NCAA tournament.

Yes, he can be successful

Despite all of the offseason obstacles and early season struggles, the Wildcats now appear to be a solid lock to go to the Big Dance in March. They have notched an impressive list of quality wins, including an 85-82 upset of in-state rival Kansas.

Disagreement and debate amongst fans seem to have overshadowed much of Weber's tenure at K-State thus far, as pro-Weber and anti-Weber factions took to arguing on Internet message boards over the validity of Weber's coaching ability.

The body of work that Weber has put together in his short time here has been nothing short of remarkable. Winning a conference title is something the likes of Lon Kruger and Frank Martin were never able to do at K-State. While fans are always entitled to their own opinions, there is one thing that can't be debated: Weber has earned the unquestioned support of the K-State community.

Yes, he was the right hire

If fans were able to forget Weber's record at Illinois, he would have been declared the messiah to K-State basketball last season. Previous struggles should not be taken into account when assessing Weber's tenure at K-State; both of his Wildcat teams have exceeded expectations and have kept the K-State basketball brand as strong as ever.

There is no longer any logical reason for the K-State fan base to be divided between "pro-Weber" or "anti-Weber" opinions. If you support K-State, you support Weber. Period.

Donald Pepon is a junior in marketing. Please send comments to sports@kstatecollegian.com.



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K-State needs to shoot effectively to neutralize TCU's height advantage

By **EMILIO RIVERA**
THE COLLEGIAN

When the TCU Horned Frogs come to Bramlage Coliseum Wednesday, they'll look to avoid a repeat of an 18-point loss to K-State in January. More than a month later, TCU still has yet to pick up a Big 12 victory. Here's how the Frogs match up with the Wildcats.

Frontcourt: Toss Up

On paper, the Horned Frogs have the advantage in the paint due to their height, but when they met earlier in the season, the K-State bigs pushed their counterparts around.

TCU's biggest rebounding threats are 6-foot-9-inch junior forward Amric Fields and 6-foot-10-inch freshman center Karviar Shepherd, who account for 256 of the team's total rebounds. If these two can get going early on the boards, they could make life tough for the

Wildcats.

The Wildcats combo of freshman forward Wesley Iwundu and junior forward Thomas Gipson reeled in 12 rebounds against the Horned Frogs. Iwundu stands at 6 feet 7 inches and will have a tough matchup on his hands against Fields, who averages 13.5 points per game this season. Fields can stretch his defender out to the arc with his 3-point ability, having hit 20 this season, shooting .364 from behind the arc.

Gipson also has a key matchup in the paint against Shepherd. The 6-foot-7-inch freshman leads the team with 153 rebounds. He also shoots at 42.3 from the field, an efficient rate for a center who averaged 8.3 points per game. What sets Shepherd apart are his 43 blocks on the season. Averaging almost two blocks per game, he will make life hard for the Wildcats close to the basket.

The team that makes their presence felt on the glass first will have the upper hand in this matchup, which means it will come down to the size of the Horned Frogs against the box-out technique of the Wildcats.

Backcourt: Wildcats

The backcourt will feature two high-ranked guards in the Big 12, with K-State freshman Marcus Foster and TCU junior Kyan Anderson. Foster ranks 12th in the conference in scoring, averaging 15.1 points per game for the Wildcats, while Anderson is seventh at 16.6 points per game for his hometown team.

Anderson is the do-all for his team. He leads the team with 35 3-point baskets, shooting an impressive .407 from behind the arc on the season. The junior also leads the team with 117 assists, setting up his teammates for easy baskets.

Foster will need to stay efficient from outside against the Horned Frogs, where he was 4-5 the last time these two teams met. Foster leads the team in both attempts and makes from long range, going 57-147 on the season. Foster also leads the Wildcats in trips to the free-throw line, where he shoots 69 percent.

Matchup of the Game: Shepherd vs. Gipson

Gipson out-rebounded Shepherd the last time around, and if he can do it again the Wildcats will get more opportunities than they'll need and could run away with the game. If Shepherd gets going, he could put his team in position to pull an upset in Bramlage.

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